3.4 FIRE MANAGEMENT

3.4.1 Resource Overview

Fire management planning policy requires that a Fire Management Plan, including fire prevention, preparedness, suppression, and use as well as subsequent restoration and rehabilitation, be conducted on an interagency basis. The Fire Management Plan conforms to the National Fire Plan and Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy (USDI 1995). The Vernal Field Office is a major partner in the Uinta Basin Interagency Fire Center (Center). The Center conducts all initial and extended-attack dispatching for the BLM, Ashley National Forest, the Uintah-Ouray Indian Agency, the USFWS - Ouray and Browns Park National Wildlife Refuges, the Utah Division of State Lands and Forestry, and the Utah component of Dinosaur National Monument. An annual operating plan (AOP) has been developed by the Center to establish operating procedures for coordinated responses and cooperative sharing of resources throughout the VPA. Consolidation of dispatch services in the Center has improved coordination of interagency fire planning among the land management agencies in the area.

Wildland fires are integral natural forces affecting public lands within the VPA. In the 10-year period from 1989 to 1998, 497 wildland fires burned a total of 8,540 acres in the VPA. Of these wildland fires, 445 were caused by lightning, and 52 were human-caused ignitions. During the period from 1999 through 2001, 24,294 acres were treated by prescribed burning in a total of nine treatment areas. Plans for the following five years included prescribed burns on approximately 11,000 acres annually (see Fire Management Plan for specific sites and acreage).

Historically, a lack of funding from resources programs limited the fuels program to a few prescribed fires. The fire suppression program was funded at limited levels until the new Fire Management Plans (FMPs) were completed, and suppression of wildland fire was the only fire management tool used. The fire suppression policy did not take into account the long-term effects on the ecosystems of the area or the long-term costs associated with it. By restricting the natural role of fire in the ecosystem, fuel loads have increased over the years. Pinyon-juniper, sagebrush, and other shrub-type species have become the dominant vegetation communities. Other large conifer species (e.g., Douglas fir, Ponderosa pine) have become decadent, and the health of these stands have declined (see Woodland and Timber section).

More than one million acres have been designated as needing fire treatments within the VPA. Treatment goals are to reduce the potential for catastrophic stand-destroying wildland fire, enhance wildlife habitat, and increase vegetation diversity. These VPA fire treatment areas also include forage areas for livestock and wildlife, mineral resources including oil and gas fields, and popular hunting and fishing areas. The area is mainly rural, but has an increasing number of residences and population centers within four identified Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) areas.

3.4.2 Fire Management Categories

The VPA is divided into fire management categories, and the appropriate fire treatment response for the VPA would be managed using the Fire Management Polygons (A, B, C, and D) as described in *BLM Handbook 1601 - Land Use Planning*, and as summarized below:

Category A – Areas where unplanned fire is not desired at all.

Category B – Areas where unplanned fire is not desired because of current conditions. Prescribed fire use is allowed to obtain resource management objectives. Mechanical/chemical treatments would be used where social and/or resource constraints preclude the use of prescribed fire.

Category C – Areas where wildland fire is desired. Prescribed fire is allowed and may be extensive to obtain resource management objectives. Mechanical/ chemical treatments would be used where social and/or resource constraints preclude the use of prescribed fire.

Category D – Areas where wildland fire is desired, and there are few or no constraints for its use.

Fire suppression activities and the appropriate management response (AMR) would be implemented through the guidance developed in the fire management categories and developed for the Vernal Field Office. The criteria used in developing the categories were determined by an interdisciplinary team of resource specialists. Criteria for each category are described below:

Category A - This category includes the salt desert shrub type where the risk of cheatgrass (a noxious weed) invasion is high after an area has been burned or treated. Also included are the major river corridors in the VPA where fire would destroy Fremont cottonwood, which is a keystone species that is presently declining. Constraints to fire management activities include cultural resource sites, high recreational use, highly developed oil and gas fields, high invasive weed potential, and threatened and endangered (T&E) species habitat. Wildland fire for resource use is not appropriate.

Category B - This category includes identified crucial deer winter range and crucial sage grouse habitat. Within this habitat, Wyoming sagebrush is identified as a keystone species, which has been in a continual state of decline because of widespread drought and invasive species encroachment. Also included within this polygon are the four identified WUI areas, including cultural resource sites, adjacent urban interfaces, sage grouse and deer winter range habitat, moderate potential for invasive weeds, and T&E species habitat. Wildland fire for resource use is not appropriate.

Category C - This category contains the pinyon-juniper type, along with the aspen/Douglas fir, mountain browse, and non-crucial areas of the sagebrush type. Fire is desired to achieve resource objectives. Constraints to fire management activities include a limited amount of oil and gas development, non-critical sage grouse habitat, a limited amount of T&E species habitat, and a limited amount of cultural resources. Wildland fire use for resource objectives is appropriate.

Category D - This category contains all of the existing Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) within the VPA. The role of fire would be widely incorporated, as there are few resource constraints within these polygons. Constraints to fire management activities would include WSA-designated areas, non-critical sage grouse habitat, a limited amount of T&E species habitat, and a limited amount of cultural resources. Wildland fire use for resource objectives is appropriate.